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Delhi cracks down on Sikh extremists



The office of Indian politician Arjun Dass, where he was assassinated. — AP picture

NEW DELHI, Thurs. — Indian security forces rounded up nearly 300 Sikh extremist suspects today in a race against time to break the back of the extremist movement before elections in Punjab State.

Security chiefs, on the defensive after the murder yesterday of Arjun Dass, a top political supporter of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, also announced a series of other measures to protect candidates in the Sept 25 poll.

But there was growing newspaper and official impatience at the failure

By CHAITANYA KALBAG

to stop extremist attacks and alarm among politicians on a "hit list" for their alleged involvement in anti-Sikh riots last November after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's murder.

In a sign of ever-increasing security, nearly 1,000 police, commandos and paramilitary forces were on duty to guard Mr Gandhi and other political figures at the funeral of Mr Dass, a senior Congress (I) Party member, today.

Mr Dass, 46, a Hindu and a member of the New Delhi Metropolitan Council, was machine-gunned to death by three Sikh extremists who struck at the council office in the capital.

The main roundup of suspects took place in Punjab, with 128 people arrested in the Sikh holy city of Amritsar and 160 in other parts of the State.

Preventive

In Punjab earlier today, two people riding a motor scooter opened fire in an industrial area of Jalandhar city. Police in the northern Sikh-majority State said two people were injured but gave no further details.

Amritsar police chief Sudarshan Lekhi told reporters the arrests were "preventive" to maintain law and order during the election.

In Punjab's capital of Chandigarh, a senior police official said 1,000 more suspected troublemakers would be kept under round-the-clock surveillance during the election campaign.

Election officials said

each candidate would get two government security officials and could employ three of his own armed bodyguards.

But newspapers questioned whether the security forces on their past record were capable of handling the extremists.

"The murder... of Arjun Dass in broad daylight has exposed the hollowness of the government's claim of tightening security and providing adequate protection to those on the hit list of the terrorists," the *Calcutta Telegraph* said.

Newspapers recalled that in the past five weeks extremists had brushed aside security nets to kill Mr Dass, Mr Lalit Maken, a parliamentarian from Gandhi's ruling Congress (I) Party, and moderate Sikh leader Harchand Singh Longowal, head of the main Sikh political party, the Akali Dal.

The *Times of India* said extremists exposed alarming gaps in security to reach their targets with ease and then escape into "thin air."

Parliamentary Affairs Minister H.K.L. Bhagat, believed to be a prime target for the extremists because civil rights reports linked him, Maken and Dass to the November riots, said he refused to be cowed by the attacks.

"I am not afraid of the assassins' bullets," Mr Bhagat said. "I know I am included (on the hit list) but I am determined to meet our people."

Mr Bhagat's East Delhi constituency was hit by some of the worst riots last November. — *Reuter*